DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 706 SO 031 053

AUTHOR	Stotsky, Sandra
TITLE	Civic Writing in Education for Democratic Citizenship. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-SO-1999-5
PUB DATE	1999-07-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0016
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Bloomington, IN 47408; Tel: 800-266-3815 (Toll Free); Tel: 812-855-3838.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Citizenship Education; *Civics; Democracy; Language Arts; Law Related Education; Secondary Education; Social Studies; Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	*Civic Writing; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Civic writing is an intellectual skill that is needed for effective and responsible participation in civil society and government. This Digest examines the concept of civic writing, identifies its purposes in democratic citizenship, and discusses how to teach it. Civic writing includes formal legal writing (speeches, petitions, resolutions), formal organizational writing (minutes of meetings, agendas, memos, newsletters), and informal and personal writing (letters to friends, relatives, neighbors supporting or opposing candidates for public office). There are five major purposes for civic writing: (1) to personalize civic relationships with public officials and/or to express a civic identity with other citizens; (2) to obtain information or assistance; (3) to provide public information or to offer a public service; (4) to evaluate public officials or services; and (5) to advocate for people or causes. Advocacy civic writing is clustered around five distinct types of political activities: (1) soliciting support for a civic or political organization; (2) supporting or opposing public officials or candidates; (3) supporting, opposing, or modifying existing or proposed laws or policies; (4) creating or removing laws; and (5) advocating new political structures or procedural rules. Civic writing can be taught by asking students to read, analyze, and judge the participatory writing of local citizens using the community newspaper. Topics to explore in this process are intended readers, tone, content, explicit purpose, accuracy, honesty, fairness, relevant information, courtesy, logical reasoning, and concern for the common good. (JH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 431 706

Civic Writing in Education for Democratic Citizenship. ERIC Digest.

by Sandra Stotsky
ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.

SO 031 053

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC Digest
Clearinghouse for Social Studies/ Social Science Education

2805 EAST TENTH STREET • SUITE 120
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA 47408
812-855-3838 • 800-266-3815

EDO-SO-1999-5

July 1999

Civic Writing in Education for Democratic Citizenship

By Sandra Stotsky

A major component of education for democratic citizenship is the teaching and learning of intellectual skills needed for effective and responsible participation in civil society and government, such as skills in civic writing. This Digest examines the concept of civic writing, identifies its purposes in democratic citizenship, and discusses how to teach it.

What Is Civic Writing? At first glance, civic literacy seems to refer only to a citizen's ability to read what is necessary for informed voting. But the ability to convey in writing one's ideas on matters relating to public life is equally critical for the proper functioning of democratic self-government.

Participatory writing—the unpaid writing that citizens do as part of the process of democratic self-government—is a necessary and inseparable component of democratic self-government. The writing that citizens do for civic or political purposes is also a far more salient aspect of our lives than most people realize. This writing includes such formal legal writing as speeches, petitions, and resolutions as well as such formal organizational writing as minutes of meetings, agendas, memos, and newsletters for political or civic groups. It also includes a great deal of informal and personal writing, such as letters to friends, relatives, or neighbors supporting or opposing candidates for public office.

Civic writing may be carefully planned in a legal or organizational framework, as reports by citizens' committees or voters' guides are, or it may emerge spontaneously, as letters to legislators and newspapers usually do. It may be extensively revised through multiple drafts, as a constitution usually is, or it may be sent off in first draft form, as many letters to public officials requesting help seem to be. It may be written by isolated individuals expressing unique perspectives, or it may be written by groups of individuals trying to achieve a common goal.

What Are the Purposes of Civic Writing? While some kinds of civic writing can be identified by their forms, many others can be identified only by their purposes and contexts. There are five major purposes for civic writing.

The first purpose is to personalize civic relationships with public officials and/or to express a civic identity with other citizens. For example, citizens who thank a public official for assistance, congratulate a successful candidate for public office, or console a defeated candidate are personalizing civic relationships with actual or potential public officials. On the other hand, when citizens wrote welcome-home letters to former Iranian hostages in 1980 or letters of sympathy to the Kennedy family after the assassinations of President Kennedy and his brother Robert, they were affirming the bonds of citizenship, motivated by the perception of a sense of shared membership in a national civic community.

The second purpose is to obtain information or assistance. Members of civic or political organizations often send out questionnaires to gather information for a voters' guide or to survey public opinion on an issue of concern to a particular community. In addition, citizens frequently write to public officials to request a service for themselves or they write on behalf of others.

The third purpose is to provide public information or to offer a public service. Citizens who are members of organized groups such as the League of Women Voters or Parent Teacher Associations frequently provide impartial information to other citizens on public issues. The written records of these groups, such as minutes, newsletters, and agendas, are vital for maintaining the continuity and democratic character of these civic organizations.

The fourth purpose is to evaluate public officials or services. Members of civic boards are often required to write regular evaluations of their public programs, services, or personnel. In addition to formal kinds of evaluations, citizens informally evaluate public services or officials as individuals or as groups by praising or criticizing services or individuals. Their writings may be sent directly to officials or public bodies, or they may be expressed indirectly through newspapers or other publications.

The fifth purpose is to advocate for people or causes. Advocacy writing is indispensable for the protection of political rights in a democracy and for the promotion of the common good. This kind of civic writing can be clustered around five distinct types of political activities:

- Soliciting support for a civic or political organization. Americans frequently form voluntary associations, and much of the writing done by their members focuses on recruiting new members or requesting funds from their members or the public at large.
- Supporting or opposing public officials or candidates. Citizens may write to support or oppose candidates for public office at all levels of government. They may also write to other citizens directly, to the media, or to other public officials to support or oppose a public official in a controversy. They may also seek removal of a public official by bringing their complaints to the voters through a recall petition (allowed in 31 states in some form) or by writing to higher officials.

Sandra Stotsky is a Research Associate at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education and Director of the Harvard Summer Institute on Writing, Reading, and Civic Education. She is also Deputy Commissioner of Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

- Supporting, opposing, or modifying existing or proposed laws or policies. The ability of citizens to make or influence the making of law, directly or indirectly, lies at the heart of the democratic form of government; they may do so through personal contacts, telephone calls, or in writing.
- Creating or removing laws. In some states, citizens can directly or indirectly create laws, through the initiative petition or through their representatives. In some states, they can also directly remove laws through referendums.
- Advocating new political structures or procedural rules. The most fundamental purpose for which citizens in a democratic form of government may write is to devise the very structures and procedures that shape their participation in the governance of their society, through constitutions or charters.

How Can Civic Writing Be Taught? Because participatory writing is an essential component of citizenship in a democracy, an important issue is how teachers may help students acquire the confidence and rhetorical skills they need in order to engage as writers in the civic process, while in school or later in adult life. When appropriate occasions present themselves, students can be asked to engage in participatory writing. *Civic Writing in the Classroom* (Stotsky 1987) describes a variety of suitable occasions and teaching methods.

The best way for teachers to prepare their students for civic writing is by asking students to read and analyze the participatory writing of the average citizen in their home community (not so much the public discourse of our most gifted orators or public figures). Such an examination might help them think carefully and clearly about basic questions of purpose and audience and appropriate ways to communicate in public. For example, students could be asked to analyze a group of communications on one topic in the letters to the editor section of their local newspaper, or a group of letters sent to a public official on a controversial topic. The students could then discuss who were the intended readers for each letter with respect to attitudes and values, how other kinds of readers might have reacted (or did react) to the letters, and how they themselves reacted to each letter's content, tone, and explicit purpose.

Students might also be asked to judge how well the writers of these communications displayed honesty; accuracy; fairness; consideration of all important, relevant information; courtesy to the writer's actual or potential critics and to opposing views; logical reasoning; and a concern for the common good. There is no better preparation for our students' own future participatory writing as adults than opportunities to critique the strengths and limitations of the communications written by members of their own civic community as judged by criteria developed in their classrooms (Stotsky 1996).

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

Center for Civic Education. NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT. Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 1994. ED 375 074.

Nader, Ralph. "Children: Toward Their Civic Skills and Civic Involvement." SOCIAL EDUCATION 56 (April/May 1992): 212-214. EJ 450 807.

NAEP Civics Consensus Project. CIVICS FRAMEWORK FOR THE 1998 NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATION PROGRESS. Washington, DC: National Assessment Governing Board, 1996. ED 407 355.

Sensenbaugh, Roger. WRITING ACROSS THE SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1989. ED 308 550.

Stotsky, Sandra. CIVIC WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1987. ED 285 800.

Stotsky, Sandra. "Connecting Reading and Writing to Civic Education." EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP 47 (March 1990): 72-73. EJ 405 145.

Stotsky, Sandra. "Ethical Guidelines for Classroom Writing Assignments." S. Totten and C. M. Hurlbert, Eds., SOCIAL ISSUES IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM. Urbana, IL: National Council for Teaching of English, 1992.

Stotsky, Sandra. "Participatory Writing: Literacy for Civic Purposes." In A.H. Dunn and C.J. Hansen, Eds., NONACADEMIC WRITING: SOCIAL THEORY AND TECHNOLOGY. Mawah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996, 227-256.

Stotsky, Sandra. "Participatory Writing: What Citizens Can Write." Charles F. Bahmueller and Charles N. Quigley, Eds. CIVITAS: A FRAMEWORK FOR CIVIC EDUCATION. Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 1991. ED 340 654.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0016. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.